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**The Clearly Fuzzy Line:
The Aesthetics of Photo Documentation**

**A Thesis Paper Submitted to Brent Good and the Department
of Visual Arts in Partial Fulfillment of A
Departmental Honors Project**

by

Schuyler Miller

May 2014

From its conception, the purpose of photography has been to record. At first, only the most stationary objects could be photographed, even walking pedestrians would appear invisible on film, but technology would quickly catch up to imagination with faster shutters, more sensitive film and smaller cameras. Now, recording a moving world and all the things that move in it is possible and from this potential the profession of the documentary photographer was created. While the advancement in technology made photographic reporting possible, there was the debate on photography's consideration as art.

Throughout its history photography has shifted sides from highest cutting edge art, when it was first developed, to being a simple tool of fact recording. The Pictorialists of the early 20th century would attempt to "elevate" photography by imitating the stylistic quality of painting with the use of soft focus, but eventually, photography would come into it's own with sharpness and detail. Now, the argument for the acceptance of photography as art is a relatively mute one as not only the most artistically intended photographs, but also documentary photographs, are sold in galleries and exhibitions and curated and displayed in Museums. Yet, there is still something different about documentary photographs being in the "art world" than when they are in the news, magazines or books. Photographs simply operate by different rules than more traditional forms of art, such as painting and sculpture, and because of this there needs to be a different way of looking at them. Few documentary photographers' images recording war, peace, and all of life in

between garner the praise of being called art. So when does a photo document both record and become an object of aesthetic value?

Photography is accepted as art, settling the old argument, but there are still strong opinions held by those in the profession about what their work really is. To some, documentary photography is an art form that also records, but to many others documentary photographs are not art, but journalism. Some of the biggest names and many of the photographers in this paper fall under the latter, including Robert Capa and Sebastio Salgado, referring to themselves strictly as journalists. Nowhere else embodies this subtle division between artist and journalist better than the famous photo agency Magnum photos. To understand why Magnum Photos is so important to documentary photography and why it characterizes this division of art and journalism a little history is needed. Magnum Photos was created in 1947 by some of the top photographers in the field, namely Robert Capa, along with his colleagues and friends Henri Cartier-Bresson, David Seymour, George Rodger, Rita and William Vandivert, and Maria Eisner as a way to give more control to the photographers¹. Most notably this was by having the photographer retain the rights to their own images as opposed to the magazine gaining the copyright to the image when purchasing it. Each of the members contributes to the expenses of the cooperative, as all of them are joint owners. Magnum has changed through the times, setting up offices in Paris, New York, London and Tokyo and initiating a long process for becoming a full member of Magnum consisting of the presentation of two separate portfolios over the span of two years, each juried by the full members

¹ Russell Miller. *Magnum: Fifty Years at the Front Line of History* (New York: Grove, 1997), 49-52.

of Magnum². Many are rejected, even those that would eventually become members and major names like Sebastiao Salgado. This rigorous scrutiny has made Magnum the aspiration of many documentary photographers as membership essentially means that you have been accepted by the best in the field. For this, most of the photographers discussed in this paper are or were members of Magnum. The annual meeting of Magnum to discuss business, then, brings many of the best documentary photographers into one-place and in an atmosphere like that, opinions often flare and tempers rage. Usually, this is centered around the acceptance of new members and the direction of the agencies future concerning if it will be, or is felt to be, focusing more on the needs of the journalists or the artists³.

One could argue that all photography is art. Well, no, it's not. Art photography is in fact a very small area of the larger scope of photography with its own objectives and concerns. Photography that is strictly art photography is concerned more often with conceptual and formal issues as much as, if not more so than, the photograph itself⁴. In the same sense, business photography, such as taking headshots or in advertising, is neither art nor documentary photography even if it does record and seek to create an appealing image. Despite these distinctions on paper, in life the lines are clearly fuzzy. Whether rightfully or not, documentary photography has come to be viewed as art and that has many people on both sides of the art verses journalism line confused. Here in this paper I will

² Russell Miller, 1

³ Russell Miller, 9-10

⁴ David Hurn and Bill Jay. *On Looking at Photographs: A Practical Guide* (Portland, Or.: LensWork, 2000), 65-71

attempt to clear up some of this confusion by focusing on that relatively small section of documentary photography that is also considered art. In researching this relatively small section of photography I found three aspects to be particularly apparent in a variety of documentary photographs and in the writings on and by documentary photographers. They are technique, chance and emotion and through investigating these aspects I hope to shed insight into the answer of the following question. When do we start calling the documentary photographer the artist and why?

Technique: Joint Operations

Technical skill, which I will define here as the understanding of one's medium and how to manipulate it, is the basis upon which all artists and photographers build. For photographers, part of this technical skill is knowing one's camera, as each brand and each one comes with its own benefits and quirks. The photographer must understand light in shutter speeds and f/stops in the same way an oil painter understands color in terms of cadmium reds and ultramarine blues. Having this understanding is crucial as with it, the photographer is able to capture images under almost any circumstance. Widely viewed as a tour-de-force of technical mastery, Ansel Adams's famous "Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico" was exposed based on his knowledge of how many foot-candles of light were reflecting off the moon⁵. Discussing photographic skill in terms of this type of knowledge is

⁵ "Ansel Anecdotes." *Our Mission*. < <http://www.anseladams.com/ansel-anecdotes/>>, accessed May 7, 2014

fairly straight forward, but it's really only half, if even half, of the story for there is something fundamentally unique to photography that subverts common art standards and that is time. Everything happens for the photographer in fractions of a second. With other mediums there is time to shift, rework, and analyze a piece, but for the photograph moving into position, composing, gauging, clicking, and a slew of other factors have to line up in a short span, or the moment is gone and the image is missed.

There is another aspect that sets photography apart from its artistic peers and that is how it records subject matter. To be photographed, something has to exist in the time and place where its image was taken. Of course, there is always the possibility for images to be manipulated, creating a false sense of reality, but those images are the exception, not the rule, in documentary photography and as such, will only be mentioned briefly in this paper. To make the distinction between how photography's subject matter is different from other mediums, bar film, clearer it is helpful compare a photographed and painted portrait. The painted portrait will undoubtedly be called a work of art, but also a likeness of the subject. The photograph, on the other hand, is a record of how that person looked at that time. Documentary photography provides verification, proof, that something happened. We expect this from newspaper and magazine images, the places where documentary photography as a profession and an art form began.

Partially due to its origins in the realm of mass media and the former questioning of the medium as an art, the field of documentary photography is

largely void of dominant styles and institutions. The results of this are that, almost paradoxically, many of the most well known people in the field have no academic or technical training in photography or art at all. Sebastiao Salgado, known for the quality of his photographs [Plate 1], was originally an economist before an abrupt career shift to photography. Henri Cartier-Bresson, called the greatest photojournalist, studied surrealist painting and would only refer to himself as an amateur photographer. The best example, though, of non-technical trained photographer is indisputably Robert Capa. Like many photographers mentioned and to be mentioned here, Capa garnered himself a title. The title was the “greatest war photographer”, and yet he almost prided himself on knowing little of the technical aspects of photography. For Capa, good photography meant being close to the action as his most famous quote shows. “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough” is an often-quoted Capaism. With examples like these, there must be something other than thorough knowledge of the camera that begets great photographers.

Henri Cartier-Bresson would be the one to crystallize the methods of himself and his photographer friend in his influential essay, “The Decisive Moment”. In this seminal essay the topic of technique is discussed only briefly and summed up in the lines saying technique is “important insofar as you must master it in order it communicate what you see”, but only the results truly matter and people need to be wary of talking too much of technique and not enough about seeing⁶. This is it, the

⁶ Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographers*. (New York, NY: Aperture, 1999), 38

technique of photography, the true skill beyond technicalities, is the ability to see. All artists must hone their ability to see, but only with photography is this ability so dependent on the exterior world.

A photograph is a series of choices and discriminations from the material world and understanding composition, the world's hidden geometry is the cornerstone of the photographer's skills⁷. With it you can build a structure, without it everything falls apart. Compositional sense, commonly called "having an eye for it", like everything is part talent and mainly practice. As Bresson says, above all photographers must train their ability to look, part of this training is looking at photographs; looking at your peers, looking at your own and, if you have the benefit of a long tradition, looking at the masters. Imitation is said to be the sincerest form of flattery, but it's also often the quickest way to learn.

In a sense, documentary photographers are constantly taking from the world. They must take notice, take impressions and take photographs to train seeing. To make large amounts of work a vital process of training and learning in all art fields, but when making lots of work in photography it must be made with discrimination. In "The Decisive Moment", Bresson warns against this tendency of being a "machine gunner", the comparison of photography to rifles is almost always spot on, as it only produces clutter, not good photographers⁸. Composing and capturing images with discrimination, deciding what to include and exclude, from which angle and timing, according to Bresson requires a "joint operation of the brain, the eye, and the

⁷ Henri Cartier-Bresson, 34

⁸ Henri Cartier-Bresson, 25

heart”⁹. The brain composes, the eye sees and the “heart” feels something about that dark shadow, that happy face in the frame. This joint operation happens almost automatically, which makes the photograph appear effortless, but it is the result of training. This underlying geometry or rhythm of the world only becomes apparent later. Capturing it is one thing, recognition of it is another.

While learning from the work of others is key to development as an artist, looking at one’s own work, scrutinizing it, is also necessary. Through this, one discovers one priorities and sense of rhythm in the world. Even the holders of the humanist photography tradition, Magnum Photos, show concern over admitting photographers taking the same kind of images to their ranks¹⁰. Still, scrutinizing ones own work is often harder than examining a stranger’s. In “Looking at Photography”, Hurn suggests that in examining ones photos one needs to mentally explore the options by shifting object and angles¹¹. If there is no way to improve on the photo then all the correct choices were made.

The fact of the matter appears to be, to the dismay of anyone desiring a neat and tidy argument, that documentary photography is best learned on the job. While Cartier-Bresson’s surrealist training may have taught him style, it did not instruct him on photographic skill. This is perhaps why photography is often seen as an easily created form of art, because almost everyone can pick it up a camera and click a button. Sebastiao Salgado first discovered his passion for photography by happenstance when he borrowed a camera from his wife, Leila, to take with him on

⁹ Henri Cartier-Bresson, 24

¹⁰ Russell Miller, 9

¹¹ David Hurn and Bill Jay, 52

a business trip to Africa while he was working for the International Coffee Organization¹². Now, Salgado is called, and rightfully so, one of the greatest photographers of our time as well as the greatest living photographer. It's not just these two titans either; photojournalism is full of these stories.

Robert Capa's original intentions to be a journalist in writings are only slightly closer to the end result than Bresson and Salgado. In fact, Capa and Bresson did not print their own images. In the early years, Robert Capa's younger brother, Cornell Capa, who would become a documentary photographer as well, did much of the printing. This may mean that Cornell Capa had the finest photographic training in the world. Does this information that many of the greatest photographers did not print their own work, handing it off to someone else, change it's validity as "art"? No, of course not. Photography, and even more so, Documentary Photography, follows very different rules than mediums like painting or sculpture. Chief most among the reasons for this is that a photograph is capable of being indefinitely reproduced and, in documentary photography at least, is intended from the outset to be¹³. Also, from a practical standpoint, much of the documentary photographer's work was expected to be printed with an accompanying magazine article as soon as possible, which in the days of film meant shipping ones undeveloped negatives. Even if he did print his own work; Capa would not be able to develop his negatives in the middle of a battle.

¹² Sebastião Salgado, Eduardo Galeano, and Fred Ritchin. *An Uncertain Grace*. (New York, NY: Aperture Foundation, 1990), 146

¹³ David Hurn and Bill Jay, 66

Despite all this, the defining characteristic of documentary photographer's is not lack of concern with the presentation and quality of their work. Magnum Photos was created for the very reason that photographer's wanted control over the rights and representations of their work. Cartier-Bresson was not only concerned about the rhythm in a single image, but throughout the complete story the pictures told, leading to many debates about the number of pages allotted for his images and layout. Within Magnum itself there have been countless debates, sometimes resulting in bitter feuds, over the quality and message of its members work. If the members did not take pride in their work and it's representation, I doubt such arguments would occur.

A particular vivid example of a documentary photographer whose work was his life, to the near exclusion of everything else is Eugene Smith. At the age of twenty-one Smith, considered a genius, was offered a contract with "Life" magazine, but the man and the magazine would have a turbulent relationship ultimately resulting in Smith leaving and joining Magnum¹⁴. While joining Magnum gave Smith the creative control he desired, he still faced challenges working with commissioners and magazine, most notably with the Pittsburg Project, which began as a commission to photograph the city for images to accompany the text and resulted in a full-scale book that almost bankrupted him and the agency¹⁵. While not all documentary photographers share this type of obsession it is clear that they all share the same feeling of the importance of their work.

¹⁴ Russell Miller, 138-142

¹⁵ Russell Miller, 150

Although it is true that some of the greatest documentary photographer's discuss little about the actual inner workings of the camera or of printing their images it is also absurd to think that, because of this, documentary photographer's do not have an in depth understanding of their medium. Throughout the history of documentary photography one camera sticks out, the Leica. Unobtrusive, portable, and precise, the Leica would be the camera worn around the necks of many a Magnum photographer as its size and stealth were almost as important conditions as image quality. Now, with the advances of digital photography has the field broadened. The choice now though is to photograph in film or digital.

In a recent interview for his, "Genesis" project, Salgado gives a brief, but rare insight into his technique as he discusses his relatively recent switch from film to digital. Changing tools has not changed the photographer much as "going digital" has not increased the number of photographs he takes and he still prints his images on contact sheets to edit instead of using the computer¹⁶. Salgado's comments on technique are brief because that is not his main concern.

"His advice to young documentary photographers is, predictably, not technical: 'You should have a good knowledge of history, of geopolitics, of sociology and anthropology to understand yourself and where you're from in order to make choices. A lack of knowledge will be much more limiting than any technical ability.'"¹⁷

The most celebrated documentary photographers are preoccupied with seeing the world around them and that's probably why that's all they talk about.

¹⁶ "Salgado's Genesis Project - Canon Professional Network." Canon Professional Network, http://cpn.canoneurope.com/content/interviews/salgado_genesis.do (April 2013). accessed May 8, 2014.

¹⁷ "Salgado's Genesis Project - Canon Professional Network."

Chance: The Lucky Find

Chance, it's true, has a role in all professional fields and every arena of our lives, but more often than not it goes unnoticed or is viewed as an isolated event. In documentary photography the element of chance, luck, plays a much more prominent role. Being in the right place at the right time, while helpful to all, is essential for the documentary photographer as once the moment is gone it cannot be reclaimed and photographed. The problem of discussing chance in a professional setting is that it can seem random, completely detached from skill and training and thus trivialize achievements. Documentary photographers, though, are often known for possessing an uncanny sense for chance, but this, I will show, is in many ways a developed skill in itself.

A story that illustrates the complex relationship of luck to photography revolves around the annual Magnum meeting, the Museum of Modern Art, and 911. As it would happen, a monthly Magnum meeting that would gather many of the top documentary photographers into one place in New York on that very day¹⁸. In the same sense that it was chance that Capa clicked the shutter at the exact moment of a rebel soldier being shot [Plate 2], it was chance that the Magnum photographer's were in nearby in New York at the time. Or maybe we were lucky they were there to document it? Either way, a lucky chance in the news world often involves someone else being unlucky, but for now this will have to wait to be unpacked until later.

¹⁸ David Halberstam, and Steve McCurry. *New York, September 11 by Magnum Photographers*. (New York: Magnum Photos, 2001)

Subsequently, an exhibition “Here is New York”, would be held of photographs of the tragic day, all submitted anonymously, with everyone welcomed to enter. Only later would it be known that some of the photographs selected were by big Magnum names and other professional while many were also by unskilled photographers. On the surface, this would seem like evidence that the professional do not deserve special recognition for their work, but on further inspection it serves to illuminate fundamental misconceptions of what documentary photography is.

While it is be true that a well-timed snap shot of a historical event, like 9/11, can hang in a gallery about the event next to a photograph taken of the same event by say, Sebastiao Salgado, it hardly means that both photographers are of the same caliber or that the snap-shot photograph could stand up in the presence of a collection of Salgado’s work. The misconception that could arise from this example, that the point-and-shoot photographer is just as skilled a photographer as the professional, arises from the misconception of what photography is and what it can do. Despite being presented as separate, self-sustaining images on a gallery wall, like the singularly unique painting or drawing, documentary photographs rarely function, or are even meant to function, in such capacity¹⁹. The documentary photographer arranges a story, a visual narrative, in which the photographs interact and expand the scope overall. For the French writer and critic, Roland Barthes in his book, “Camera Lucida”, this idea was the “studium” and “punctum” and for Cartier-Bresson in his “Decisive Moment”, this was the “core” and the “sparks”.

¹⁹ David Hurn and Bill Jay, 60

Rarely, Cartier-Bresson says, will there be a photograph that possesses both the “core” and the “sparks”²⁰. The core, in a sense, is the defining moment of the story; the center by which the less contextual “sparks” can connect to, and deepen the story, which he called the “picture story”. The “picture story”, not the self-sustaining singular photograph was the goal of Cartier-Bresson. It was by realizing what photography, in the documentary sense, could best do and what it could rarely do that Bresson would come to be known as the “greatest photojournalist”. This is also why photographers who would rarely print their own photographs, like Eugene Smith, would get into heated debate with editors over layout.

The “Here is New York” exhibition also had the benefit of the images needing little to no explanation. In the standard format of documentary photographs, magazines and books, captions are often essential to grasping the full meaning of the image. It’s standard for photographer’s to keep logbooks of information for their captions to send to publishers. The documentary photographs benefit from explanation may run counter to the idea that art should not need to be explained or in some way losses value when it is. But think of this, how would we known, picking up an issue of “Life”, that Capa’s photograph “The Falling Soldier” was taken at the moment of a revolutionary soldier’s death or merely of a training exercise?

Captions often provide needed context for documentary photographs, assisting the viewer in understanding what the image specifically shows. Some general information may be gleaned from the image alone and this is what Barthes would term the “studium”, a sort of general interest that all humans share, born

²⁰ Herni Cartier-Bresson, 23

from things like culture and faces²¹. Few photographs though possess “punctum”, something that draws and keeps the viewer interested, and is often personal²². It is likely that the “Here is New York” exhibition, so soon after the event and so close to home, had more “punctum” concentrated in one place than would be normal. In such a context it may be difficult to separate the many good photographs from the few great works.

So far, only the outcome of chance for the photographer has been discussed, not the processes of creating it. A major aspect of chance is amount of exposure, by which I mean the amount of time working on a subject, in an area, or with people being photographer, the amount of photographs taken, and the amount of preparation for that chance moment when it all comes together. Quickness is crucial to documentary photography where one is dealing with a world in motion, but just as important is patience. To exemplify this there is an anecdote of how Bresson was composing a photograph of a rice paddy field in Sumatra, only to realize that the composition could be improved. Shortly he observes a turbaned woman coming down a path that crosses the frame, waits for her to get into the right position and then clicks the shutter²³ [Plate 3]. How much of that photograph was luck, and how much was preparation? Another, possibly more lucky example, is of Salgado’s famous photographs of the assassination attempt of Ronald Reagan. Through a series of events that involved only partially understanding English,

²¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26

²² Roland Barthes, 27

²³ Peter Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century*, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 42

getting a ride with a security detail, and going with his gut, Salgado managed to be at the scene of the incident as it happened²⁴. As mentioned in Salgado's example, part of making your own luck when you are photographing people, which is usually what documentary photographers do, is getting to know them. Another Capa quote, "like people and let them know it", exemplifies this idea. Fittingly, Capa himself was known to be quite the charmer capable of talking himself out of, or into, nearly any situation.

While much of what has been written so far is a refutation of the reliance on chance that appears so prevalent in documentary photography, chance in and of itself certainly does play a role. Barthes, in "Camera Lucida" even gives luck a place as one of the five ways in which a photographer can surprise the viewer. He terms this "Trouville", the lucky find. In his terms the luck is in finding the object, or event, not in photographing it²⁵. In fact, there is never anything lucky about the intention to take a photograph, only the circumstances of the world that is being photographed. Chance also tends to be sort of odd, or funny in this sense that it is unexpected²⁶. This unexpected surreal in the real is particular to photography and was central to the work of Cartier-Bresson in particular. He titled his book the "Decisive Moment", because that is what the moment of photographing is. To manipulate the scene in the viewfinder would be to falsify the event. It is here and it is gone in a world in motion and the photographer has to be quick enough to take it,

²⁴ Russell Miller, 253-255

²⁵ Roland Barthes, 33

²⁶ David Hurn and Bill Jay, 53

lucky enough to be there to see it, and paying attention, having honed ones ability to see.

Emotion: The Power in Seeing

The reality of photography, the fact that for something to be photographed it has to have existed, happened, is where documentary photography draws much of its power. No matter how skeptical, photographs tend to be viewed as proof, truth, so much so that photographs can even be admissible as evidence in court²⁷.

Regardless of where one draws the distinction between artist and documentary photographer, both share the goal of being emotionally impactful to the viewer. In this respect, I venture to say that the documentary photographer has the advantage over other mediums because of this perception of realness. When we look at photographs of soldiers at the front or survivors fleeing the area that would be ground zero an emotional connection is created with the subject, or at very least, a recognition of shared humanity. If theses photographs are also beautifully composed it may be appreciated for aesthetic reasons that can enhance the viewers connection with the subject. Others would disagree with everything I just wrote, claiming that documentary photography is a kind of exploitation and artistic concerns only glamorize. In this interplay between recording and emotion, exposure of issues and potential exploitation arises the great dilemma of what it means to be a documentary photographer.

²⁷ David Hurn and Bill Jay, 30

The term “concerned photography” originates from Cornell Capa and is a term that all of the photographers in this paper fall under. In many ways it is the ideal of the documentary photographer as someone who creates social awareness with their images. To do this, documentary photographers must often photograph difficult subject such as poverty and war, which can often lead to misunderstandings of their intentions. Given his title as the “greatest war photographer” it might appear that Robert Capa loved war and conflict, but paradoxically for the “greatest war photographer”, he was largely opposed to war.

The elder Capa had a history of displacement due to war and political struggles. First forced to leave his native Hungary and then his new home of Berlin for Paris due to political unrest and the danger it presented, Capa would come to identify with those displaced from their homes, a theme that would become major focus of his photography²⁸. His history as the displaced was also part of why Robert Capa was such an excellent war photographer, as he would become used to and at ease in these tense situations. Despite this comfort with the tension, Capa was not comfortable with the suffering of others. Capa’s charisma was underscored by compassion and sensitivity toward the challenges the people he photographed faced and it has even been said that the title of “war photographer” is somewhat of a misnomer as, while photography of battle makes up a significant portion of Capa’s work, much more of it is focused on people on the fringes of war, people recovering,

²⁸ Cornell Capa and Richard Whelan, *Cornell Capa, Photographs*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992), Foreword

and people at peace²⁹. No matter what is photographed, be it war, politics, or peace, the true subject of the concerned photographer is humanity.

Concern, it should be clarified, is not pity. In fact, if the photographer simply pities those they are photographing, they are doing them a disservice.

Unfortunately, pity seems to be the aim of much mass media photography. These images of poverty, abuse and destruction are taken in constantly in society.

Sometimes this is intentional, though often it is unintentional through advertisements, commercials, and news. Oddly, these images that are supposed to make us concerned through pity only make us change the channel or close the tab to be quickly forgotten. Who hasn't changed the channel the moment a commercial for the Humane Society comes on? These types of images, the headliners and shockers, have made a business of poverty. Nothing is more opposed to the ideology of the concerned photographer than this, yet concerned photographers may often find themselves under attack by those claiming that they are doing the very same thing. If the photographer's methods and their photographs are truly examined and understood it is clear that what the concerned photographers aims and understanding are wholly different from the standards of largely cookie-cutter mass media photography.

Perhaps no photographer exemplifies this distinction clearer than Sebastiao Salgado. Salgado came to photography rather by chance, but found that it aligned with his humanitarian desires. Originally working as an economist, Salgado changed his career because he felt that he could be more directly helpful and

²⁹ Cornell Capa and Richard Whelan, Foreword and Introduction

involved as a photographer³⁰. This desire to be close and connected to the people and places he is photographing is a defining factor of Salgado's work that separates him from the standard "in and out" media approach that makes poverty into a commodity³¹. For a numerical example, Salgado would spend around 15 months photographing those suffering from famine in the Sahel Region of Africa while donating his services to Doctors without Borders³². By taking time to create relationships and understand the people that he is photographing Salgado is able to subvert the common stereotypes of those living in poverty and photograph genuine, even romantic, images of their lives.

Salgado's possibly best-known collection of work, the miner's of Serra Pelada, provides an in depth example of the lengths that he goes to for his work. Part of the larger project to document the ongoing and near conclusion of the industrial revolution playing out in what is called the "Third World", titled "Workers", the photographs from Serra Pelada show the complex relation of the gold miner's work and social life and conflicts with the managing powers. Two things are made clear in this collection of photographs, one, that these workers are far from powerless and, two, that Salgado had to become accepted to take these photos. It is hard to look at the photograph of the man caked in mud, hands on his hips, smiling, and to read pity into it [Plate 4] in the same way that it is hard not to be amazed at the image of throngs of men climbing their way out of the gorge [Plate 5]. Citizens of the more developed world are cultured to see people in these

³⁰ Sebastião Salgado, Eduardo Galeano, and Fred Ritchin, 146

³¹ Sebastião Salgado, Eduardo Galeano, and Fred Ritchin, 11

³² Sebastião Salgado, Eduardo Galeano, and Fred Ritchin, 145-146

situations of hard labor as powerless, but Salgado doesn't provide that in the image of a miner grabbing the gun of a guard [Plate 6]. Salgado's greatest skill may be in his ability to dignify the people while still criticizing the practice.

Yet, for showing honor and happiness along with poverty, which is to show the poor with humanity, Salgado has been criticized and misunderstood. Ironically, his photographs have been seen as not doing justice to the conditions of the poor. The best response to these accusations comes from showing of his "Workers" photographs in London where Salgado states that the "First World" has trouble understanding the "Third World".

"They want it to look miserable, unhappy. 'But, if you have lived and worked in India, for example, you will know that for many workers misery is not material; for them, misery is to do with loneliness and rejection, with leading life isolated from the group, and not principally with hardship and poverty. Look how the women who dig the Rajasthan Canal and toil in the coal mines dress in saris, wear as much jewelry as they own and have fresh flowers plaited into their hair. If I celebrate that dignity and beauty, what is wrong in doing so?'"³³

At the same time as Salgado's photographs must not be understood as pitying the materially poor, they must also not be understood as meant to accuse the materially better off. Systems are criticized in his work, not cultures. Salgado would become one of the highest grossing members of Magnum before starting his own agency, Amazonia, with his wife Leila and, when he is not traveling, he lives in Paris with his family. Receiving and award at a banquet in New York, Salgado would say,

³³ Jonathan Glancey, "Workers, warriors, heroes: Sebastiao Salgado's 'Workers', now on show in London, is an epic account of the world of manual labour. But what does it tell us?", The Independent. Independent Digital News and Media. <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/workers-warriors-heroes-sebastiao-salgados-workers-now-on-show-in-london-is-an-epic-account-of-the-world-of-manual-labour-but-what-does-it-tell-us-1467573.html>. Accessed May 8, 2014.

“there is nothing wrong with the way you live, ... as long as long as all the people of the world have the same possibility of living in similar material conditions.”³⁴

Through his photographs, Salgado is working toward this ideal of equality by showing common humanity beyond situations

Still, there is often a gray line in terms of the photographer’s personal profit from the suffering of others, made most apparent in photography of war. We’ve already seen this uncomfortable juxtaposition of concerned photographer and war photographer with Robert Capa and it’s true for many others as well. Still, this image would be one of many to secure in name and fame in the realm of photojournalism, if not as a household name, meaning that Capa profited immensely from it. At the same time, Capa could not have saved the man by not taking the photograph and it would have been an injustice of another kind if it were not printed to tell the story of the Spanish Civil war. “It’s not always easy to stand aside and be unable to do anything except record the suffering around one”, is yet another Capa quote that shows the difficulty of the situations documentary photographers often face. For someone who photographed on the front lines like Capa this must have been the case quite often.

In the case of Capa and “The Falling Soldier” the chance of the moment meant that there was no moral conflict before taking the photograph. This is not always the case though as more often there is a decision to make. A contrasting story of morality is one told by Magnum photographer Don McCullin about a public execution of a street bomber during the Vietnam War.

³⁴ Sebastião Salgado, Eduardo Galeano, and Fred Ritchin, 151

“It shouldn’t have been a public Gilbert and Sullivan display of theatrical execution. So I kind of walked away and I heard a man, who later won a Pulitzer prize as a journalist, not a photographer, saying “Great stuff! Did you get it?” And it made me ashamed.”³⁵

In this story we have two sides of the coin, the concerned photographer who walked away and the not-so concerned photographer who took the shot. In both Capa’s and McCullin’s stories there was nothing to be done about the death, but the difference is foreknowledge. Should the other photographer have walked away as well? A seemingly contradictory key to good documentary photography is knowing when not to take a photograph³⁶. Any photographer, like Salgado, who has to become accepted by the community in order to take the photographs they are after knows the importance of this discretion. As this is also reliant on the amount to which the photographer understands the people they are photographing, it is subjective on their part. Now back to the question of whether or not the other photographer should have walked away. Did they cross a moral line in taking the photograph? Where is the line? Is there a line? Is the goal to depict the horrors of war and suffering inflicted on others or is it to get the iconic photograph? Even McCullin said that there was little sympathy for street bombers³⁷ but do the actions of the man revoke any right to privacy? These are all questions that only produce more questions, not clear answers. Ironically, making the decision of when to not photograph may be the most challenging issue.

Behind the morality question of McCullin’s story and its implications there is another debate about the job of the documentary photographer. A wholly objective

³⁵ Russell Miller, 221

³⁶ David Hurn and Bill Jay, 52

³⁷ Russell Miller, 221

eye would have easily answered my previous questions with something like “it happened, so photograph it”, but as we all know, humans are not completely objective creatures. When McCullin decided not to take the photograph, he also took a side. So did the other photographer that decided to click the shutter. Oddly, they both might have been on the same side in this case. As already discussed, documentary photographs are generally accepted as proof, so in turn it is expected that the photographer should have an eye as equally objective as the lens. At the same time, the objective eye does not recognize what is important, impactful about a moment nor does it compose. Is it biased or exposing an untold side of the story, the very connotations of those words underline the challenges of the concerned photographer who must be anything but impartial yet not skew the reality. This is not to say that documentary photographer’s can only and do only show one side of the story. Bresson is the prime example of this as a man who could photograph prostitutes and the Parisian upper crust [plate 7] with the same skill and understanding, somewhat satirizing and celebrating at the same time. Salgado too takes a side while subverting our expectations by showing the workers as modern heroes. I used the word story earlier in this section, and even much earlier than that with Bresson’s “picture-story” to describe the aim of the photographer. Story is a much better word to describe the goal, especially now that documentary photographer’s main format is the book, as story implies a point of view, a goal, a meaning that is directed by the author, but interpreted by the reader. Additionally, story implies an emotional undertone or message. The photographer presents their story and view and we are left to think about the images, this is generally the way

art works. Without the subjective angle combined with an objective lens there would be no need to write about the art of documentary photography because it would not even exist.

Documentary photographers often choose sides, or to put it more positively, formulate an argument, take a stand, and relate to the concerns of others in and through their photography. The problem that arises from this is rooted in one of the powers that photographs possess. That power is the potential to inform, motivate, shape and change public opinion. Richard Nixon would say that the Vietnam war was 'the first in our history during which our media were more friendly to our enemies than to our allies'³⁸. That side that both McCullin and the other photographer were likely on, despite moral differences, was an anti-war, anti-Vietnam war side. Certainly anyone who has seen the images of children screaming and running from burning napalm understands the power of the photograph in opinion making. These images become icons engrained in the common memory. Unfortunately, out of context these icons can be misinterpreted and deceiving. Recently the famous V J day kiss photograph, not necessarily opinion shaping, but defining of an idea of victory and love, was proven not to have been a photograph of a couple reunited. Does that matter, and if so how much?

Concerned photographers, most of Magnum for that matter, and even the swashbuckling Robert Capa shot many of their images as arguments against war. At the same time though, their photographs often honor the soldiers and their action. The few salvageable photographs taken by Robert Capa of the D-Day landing show

³⁸ Russell Miller, 244

this [plate 8]. The subject is always humanity and humanity exists on both sides of the imaginary war line. As we've already seen, with Salgado in particular and many others, humanity exists on both sides of the poverty line as well. The whole world is the potential subject for the photographer and through the joint operation of the eye and the lens they strive to get at something deeper than material fact and reach us on an emotional level.

Beyond Aesthetics

Both the controversy and beauty of photography relies on the fact that it is real. The photograph allows us to break through space and time and make connections with those far away or in the past. It becomes a collective visual history. Documentary photographers desire to make these connections and tell these stories, but to accomplish this goal they often have to get closer to the horrors of humanity than most anyone else. War, disease, hunger, and genocide, by capturing images of these, the documentary photographer cements their reality in our minds, and for that we are both thankful and horrified. Recording human tragedies as these is one thing, but finding beauty in the darkness of humanity is another. The Magnum co-founder, George Rodger once realized he needed to step away from war photography when he found himself composing dead bodies³⁹. Even horrible scenes can have aesthetic qualities that could be called beauty and that is something that is truly disconcerting due to the reality of the photograph. There is also little human solace to be found in the images of the mass graves of the

³⁹ Russell Miller, 43

Holocaust because in them all humanity has been extinguished. These images are the most difficult and jarring because of this, but they are also the exception to the rule as all life is gone from them. In the vast majority of documentary images life persists and maybe even thrives in harsh conditions. Beauty of both kinds, aesthetic and human, can be found in these conditions, which is something that is difficult for a pitying viewer to understand.

As with all art the viewer must take the time to study documentary photographs to understand their meaning. This, it seems is becoming harder and harder to do as images come to us progressively faster and more numerous through technology. When camera phones abound will there be any room for the war photographer? The current photographing of the occupation of Crimea may give us a view of what's to come. I certainly think the role of the documentary photographer will remain relevant as both art and reporting. After all it has already survived the challenges of competing with live television newscasts and the subsequent fall of the magazine market on which it depended. This is because there is something very powerful about the frozen image, which unlike a news broadcast, remains still in time for us to examine it and crystallize it in memory. Still, how will our reaction to these photographs change as we become ever more surrounded with media and become accustomed to documenting and sharing our own lives in images?

The images that we most associate with documentary photography are often those of war, poverty and unrest, and its true that most of this paper has focused on those, but this is because these are the events that so distinctly mark themselves off

in time and place and are important news. Happiness, celebration and even wealth can be the subject of documentary photographer, not just happiness in spite of suffering. Bresson's particularly wonderful and witty images of luxury show this. Nature too, distinct, yet wholly inseparable from human experience can become the sole subject as seen in Sebastiao Salgado's work in "Genesis", showing that the whole of existence is the photographer's subject.

Despite the benefits of this vast potential subject matter, photographing a world in motion presents its own limitations and challenges that the photographer must adapt to. No other art form, bar film, is so dependent on factors outside of oneself as documentary photography and due to this, documentary photographers must learn to react to the world in a way that balances the reality and the photographers' vision. To do this, they must understand technique and the camera, but more importantly must train themselves in seeing. Chance too, or what at first appears to be chance, plays a role in documentary photography as well as being at the right place at the right time is key, but much of this is in fact knowledge gained from years of experience and based on the unique nature of photography. While skills in technique and chance are important qualities, the ability to convey emotions of the subject, and also the photographer themselves, is what is essential and what separates the good from the great. This is when the documentary photograph reaches beyond fact recording and into the realm of meaning.

One of the most wonderful aspects of photography is how much it encompasses. In this paper I have explored a relatively small portion of photographers working in one aspect of the medium. There is much more to learn.

I set out not only to debunk subtle prejudices of documentary photography as art, but also to discern what makes for the best documentary photographs and photographers. Documentary photographers, regardless of how they refer to themselves are both artist and reporter simultaneously.



[Plate 1] Salgado, Sebastiao, 1944-, Mexico: Cemetery of the town of Hualtla de Jimenez. 1980
Artstor.org



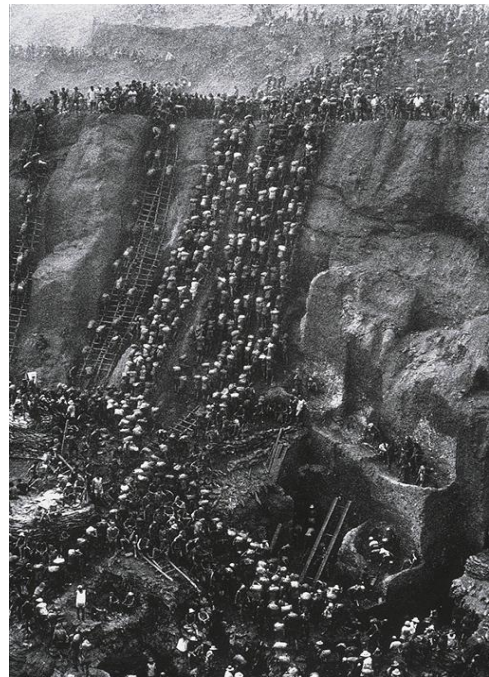
[Plate 2] Capa, Robert. 1913-54. The Spanish Civil War (Popularly known as the "Falling Soldier"). 1936
Artstor.org



[Plate 3] Bresson, Henri Cartier, 1908-2004. Sumatra. Rice fields in the Minangkabau country. 1950.
Artstor.org



[Plate 4] Salgado, Sebastiao 1944-
<http://www1.ci.uc.pt/iej/alunos/2001/sebastiaoSalgado/rosto7.html>



[Plate 5] Salgado, Sebastiao 1944-
Serra Pelada.
Artstor.org



[Plate 6] Salgado, Sebastiao. 1944-. Dispute among the workers of the SerraPelada gold mine and military police.

Artstor.org



[Plate 7] Bresson, Henri Cartier, 1908-2004. The Garnier Opera House.

Artstor.org



[Plate 8] Capa, Robert. 1913-54. Operation Overlord. 1944.
Artstor.org

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